

A UU History of Heresies: What's the Through Line in our Faith?

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Sunday, November 7, 2021
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Prayer: [“Prayer for When Words Fail,”](#) by Rev. Leslie Takahashi

Reading: [The Spiritual Sources of the UU Tradition](#) (from the UUA Bylaws)

Hymns: #360, Here We Have Gathered; #123 Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; #1028, Fire of Commitment. Hymn notes: Spirit of Life is a UU hymn written by Carolyn McDade in 1981, and is probably sung more frequently in more of our congregations than any other song; the Spanish version of the text was written in the 1990s by Ervin Barrios, from the First Unitarian Church of San Jose. Today's opening hymn (#360) uses a tune that is nearly 500 years old, sung in churches of the Reformation in Europe, but the words come from 1979, by Alicia Carpenter, a Unitarian Universalist (I revised the third line of verse two to be gender-neutral: “we of all ages, neighbors, kindred, friends.” Our closing hymn was written in 2001 by two UU ministers, Jason Shelton and Mary Katherine Morn.

Sermon

A month ago a student from Sacramento State University sent an email to ask Reverend Lucy and me if one of us would meet with her for her assignment to write about a religious community. However, we were out of town. We were at a UU ministers' retreat for two days, and we didn't see her email. We got back Thursday night. On Friday morning I got an urgent text from Krystal, our Administrative and Facilities Coordinator. She said: *The student didn't hear back from you, and she's here at the church. She wants to see you.* I replied: *Tell her I'll be there in 30 minutes.* I was a little annoyed, but mostly I was impressed at such persistence. I imagined asking her: “Have you considered a career in journalism?” It turns out that *is* her major, and she was working on a story that was due at 5 o'clock in the afternoon for an advanced reporting class. While waiting for me, she found three members of our weekday campus improvement crew digging holes and installing a fence by the playground. She talked to John, a UUSS member who practices Tai Chi and Qui Gong and teaches it here one Sunday a month before church. And she interviewed Karen, an earth-based UU pagan who grew up as the child of an Episcopal priest. And she talked to Jeff. He declares himself an atheist and he shows up for services every Sunday, whether in person or on Zoom. With a reporter's notebook in hand, she asked them about their participation in our church and their beliefs. Meanwhile, a friend who had come along with her was walking the circles of our Labyrinth in the meadow. I approached this reporter and introduced myself to her. I pointed to the church members she had

interviewed. “You can just ignore everything these people told you,” I said. She laughed, fortunately, and she didn’t write it down.

I took her to the main hall for a tour. Then we sat in the library for her to ask me questions. Of course, she had already witnessed a key aspect of our UU tradition. That is, we emphasize deeds over creeds. The deeds don’t *have to* involve shoveling dirt. They don’t have to include making coffee, baking dessert for a fundraiser, or volunteering in Religious Education, but *for many of us*, they do. Moreover, we don’t practice our faith only on Sunday. The deeds by which we measure our faithfulness to our values include the ways we act at home, at work, at the store; the ways we speak in public and on email and on Facebook (God help us).

Deeds over creeds means we think about the ways our actions affect other people—those we know and those in our world whom we’ll never meet. In a UU community, we remember that we are related to other living beings, dependent on them and responsible to them. We are part of the web of life on this earthly home.

“How did this religion come about?” she asked me. I gave her a pamphlet. But I also gave some history. This month our Soul Matters theme is called Holding History. Given that, it seems like a suitable time to review the basics of both where we came from and where we are now as a faith. As a religious movement, we look very different now than we did 200 years ago.

As I told the reporter, in the first two decades after the founding of the United States both Unitarianism and Universalism arose not as churches but as heresies within churches. Two hundred years ago, in Massachusetts and other parts of New England, the dominant belief system was Calvinist Christianity. It had been dominant since the 1600s. This theology said that people are inherently depraved and unworthy of God’s love. And it said that *only* because of the willing sacrifice of Jesus Christ and his resurrection could a lucky few of us unworthy people be spared the punishing fires of hell. In and around Boston, in the early 1800s, a group of liberal Christian ministers came to reject this openly. Eventually, their heresy was called Unitarian Christianity. They argued that all people were inherently blessed by God. They said that we could grow into likeness to God. They asserted the possibility of human growth and renewal; they found assurance for this faith in the life and words of Jesus.

To us, this idea may feel obvious, but in those days, it was scandalous; it was heresy. The Unitarians didn’t want to be attacked by Christians they had known as family for generations. They didn’t want to be accused, vilified, or expelled, but that’s what they

experienced. It was traumatic. Any family breakup can be traumatic, for people and for organizations. And even though most of the Unitarian churches kept their church property, and their ministers kept their jobs, they were still smarting from the loss. I think this is why the Unitarians devoted so much energy and occupied so much time over the next 150 years, in arguing over what they were and who they were, theologically.

Earlier you heard me say that we emphasize how we live our faith over the words we use to describe it, *deeds over creeds*. Yet our Unitarian history is filled with arguments that sound like fights over creeds. Less than 20 years after the Unitarians had split with conservative Christian churches, a number of younger men and women who had grown up as Unitarians formed the Transcendentalist movement. This was a new wave of spirituality. It rejected old forms of church. Sacred scriptures were merely old books, they said. Rather than cold academic approaches, Transcendentalists welcomed new ideas and passionate, emotional responses to the wonders of life. As these New England upstarts gained a following, they seemed like a threat to the power and comfort of the founding Unitarian ministers.

Concerned for their identity and reputation, many of the traditional ministers wanted to keep asserting that their churches were still Christian ones; their faith was still based on the life of Jesus and his teachings. Of the many offenses which upset their Unitarian establishment, one was a sermon given in 1841 by Theodore Parker. He said that most of Christianity would fall away over time. It was transient; most of it didn't need to endure—the buildings, the books, the rules, even the reverence for Jesus. What would endure, Parker said, were the *moral* and *spiritual teachings* of Jesus. They were permanent; no matter who said them, those teachings would last because you could feel in your heart that they were true. Not only was Parker denounced for this heresy by conservative Christians; he was rejected by most of his own Unitarian brothers in ministry. (And they *were* all men.) Perhaps many of the Unitarians turned their back on Parker because they didn't want his heresy to endanger their own credibility. They didn't want to lose what status they felt they still had among all other ministers. Or perhaps they saw their buildings, their books, and their rules as keys to their identity.

The first wave of Boston Unitarians occupied New England's wealthy classes—including business owners and educated professionals. As elite white men, they prospered in a country which relied on enslaved labor and the taking of indigenous lands for economic

expansion. They felt good about their privilege, and they guarded their comforts—their faith as much as their furniture.

Though our founding Unitarians had been defined as heretics, as innovators, many of them turned into guardians of an institution to keep it from innovating more. On the one hand, arguments over which beliefs are acceptable are also arguments about who belongs and who doesn't. On the other hand, they are the normal expressions of stress and pain over change. As individuals, families, and organizations, it's often hard to emerge into something new. It can be painful to give up what you have been used to and to welcome new perspectives. It's not easy to feel challenged by people you thought you knew. Unfortunately, our growing pains and the fights over them occupied a tragic amount of energy and attention over nearly two centuries.

In May or June every year, since 1820, ministers in our movement have presented essays or lectures to their gathered colleagues on topics having to do with the liberal ministry, the nature of our movement, and visions for the future. This lecture series has been going on for 200 years, and in most of those years, the ministerial speakers addressed our identity as a faith and various aspects of ministry. Yet they seldom applied our faith to the challenges in the larger society. Even if a speaker was engaged in work for justice or civic improvement in his local ministry, he didn't talk about the need for our movement to confront the oppressive systems in which we were living. No matter the turmoil tearing up the country or the progressive advances of their day, they looked inward. They talked about our identity—but not about our mission.

This didn't change until recently. One exception is the essay or lecture given in 1976, by the Reverend Judith Hoehler. She was only the fourth woman invited to give the lecture in its history, which by then was 155 years old. In 1976, Hoehler stated that UUs like to hang out in the respectable middle of the road, to stay on the surface of putting our values into action. We can be reluctant to give up our comfort, even though comfort has never been on our list of principles or values. However, she said, this reluctance brings with it a lack of depth. It keeps us on the surface of things, both as individuals and as congregations. She said: "Depth requires commitment; commitment requires pain, [hard work], and... sacrifice." (*The Through Line*, 91).

Today as UU congregations, we sound and look different than we did 200 years ago, and even from the way we looked and sounded 20 years ago. There have been times when we overcame our worries about being conventional or comfortable as a religious movement. An example of such growth is our denominational statement of the spiritual *Sources* that we draw

upon as UUs. Theo and I read the list of Sources to you earlier. In their current form, five of them were adopted in 1985 along with our statement of UU Principles. Delegates from UU congregations discussed, argued, listened, edited, and voted. Following a similar process, the 6th Source was adopted two decades later. It reads: “Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” This and the other statements are not a creed you have to believe, but they are expressions of who we are. They are part of the Bylaws of the UUA, our denomination. Currently there is a commission charged with reviewing these documents, gathering input from congregations and other stakeholders, and proposing new or updated expressions of who we are and what we are about. This congregation is invited to give input for the commission’s work. Indeed, we already have. By voting to endorse the proposed 8th Principle, we have urged the commission to make explicit a commitment to racial justice and equity within this religious movement. It will be exciting to see what emerges from the commission’s work. It may not always be easy or comfortable, but it will be exciting.

In a UU community, we remember that we are related to other living beings, dependent on them and responsible to them. We are part of the sacred circle of life. Yet within this wide embrace, we represent a wide variety of beliefs and words to express our beliefs. To value deeds over creeds doesn’t mean we don’t have clear and strong beliefs among us, but it reminds us to speak our beliefs with humility, so we can listen to others’ perspectives with grace.

In a UU community, we remember that we are related to other people, and responsible to one another. Part of our growing pains and our growth has been to expand our sense of what it means to say “one another.” Part of our growth has been to practice humility as we listen to and learn from people who were left out of our movement or left on the margins of it, because they had been sidelined by the larger society. Sometimes our innovations as a movement have involved the realization that we were not always as innovative as we felt. In holding our history honestly, we can see how much growth remains for us in order to embody our values with depth and commitment. In holding our history faithfully, we can see that we have always been worthy of this depth and this commitment, and we remain up to it. Let us know that it is a worthy endeavor, and we are up to it, now and in the days to come. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.